

One of the Top Ten Canyons in Europe



The sizeable population of Skopje is lucky to have one of the continent's most exciting canyons on the outskirts of the city, just half an hour, ride away from the centre. It is ideal for recreational activities, and its high wet walls create an "air conditioning" effect, which is especially valued in the traditionally hot and dry summers when the concrete jungle of the capital becomes unbearably hot. The place is also popular with the kids from the surrounding villages who usually swim and jump in the lake from the rocks never failing to attract the attention of other visitors.

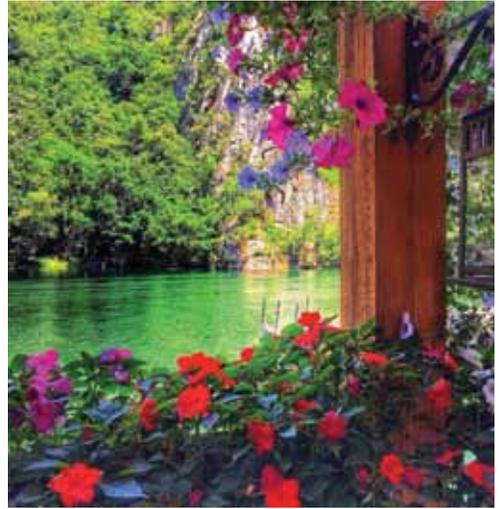
But it is not only for the cooling effect that the Matka Canyon is so popular. It boasts 1,000 plant species, twenty per cent of which are endemic, as well as various butterfly species not found anywhere else in Europe. The canyon is also home to vultures and, occasionally, bald eagles which are protected by law to save them from extinction.

The lake is artificial and was created when the Treska River was dammed before the Second World War. The river bed used to be some thirty meters below the actual lake level, making the cliffs of the canyon even more narrow and vertical. The alpinists adore the cliffs near

the dam and hikers can be seen all around the lake. Sometimes special police forces have to intervene to save hikers trapped among inaccessible rocks. There are many routes of different difficulty, while the



George and Holy Trinity. On the road to the highest point of the canyon opposite St. Andrew's shore are the ruins of the Sveta Nedela (Holy Sunday) monastery with a spectacular view over the lake. St.



most comfortable one follows the edges of the lake for at least six kilometres inside the canyon. There are regular small boat tours that take visitors deep into the canyon. The lake ducks, wild hogs, rabbits and other forest animals can often be seen during the ride. The restaurants offer excellent dishes of national cuisine, and occasionally during the hunting season exclusive game dishes.

Before it was turned into an artificial lake, Matka was home to over 36 monasteries. Today one of the best preserved monasteries is the one dedicated to the Holy Virgin located just before the row of cave restaurants. Another one is the monastery devoted to St. Andrew lying right on today's lake shore and built by one of the brothers of the legendary King Marko, Andrew. It had valuable frescoes by John the Metropolitan, who had also painted the Prilep Monastery of King Volkasin, the father of Marko and Andrew. Just above St. Andrew there is a complex of three monasteries: Holy Salvation, St.

Nikola Sisevski lies in the vicinity of the Sisevo village and is easily spotted from the road. It has a beautiful architecture and painted exterior walls. Deep inside the lake the remains of the flooded village of Kozarevo hide the traces of St. John's Monastery where healing waters used to flow.

There are around ten caves in the canyon. The shortest is just 20 meters long, while Vrelo Cave is considered to be one of the longest in the world. There are two huge pits 35 metres deep each, which are a real challenge for the alpinists.

Just before the dam, there are several kayak tracks where professional athletes regularly practice this popular sport. National and international competitions are often organized there too.

So Matka is a must visit destination, and its numerous fans were not at all surprised when one of the most respectable international newspapers, *The Guardian*, placed it among the top ten European canyons.